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TEEN STRINGS

STRINGS

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AT TIPPET RISE

JORDI SAVALL
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STRINGS

SPECIAL FOCUS

Teen Strings

28 Electric Avenue

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COVER: MARK WOOD
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Mark Wood

When rock violinist Mark Wood decides to deliver a message to you, he'll probably assume his signature conversational power stance. His feet will be spread wide with his back straight to bring himself down to your height—he's tall and big on eye contact. Most likely, he'll be wearing leather in various degrees of distress. He is, after all, a rock star. But once he locks eyes with you and begins talking about string education, you'll come to find out that he is also a man on a serious mission.

He argues that if we don't react to how the traditional model of string education is losing the interest of modern teens, we won't be able to provide a strong foundation for the future of string playing. He doesn't object to classical training—he's a Juilliard-trained violinist himself. But in order to keep kids interested, some of them at least, he says, are going to need the opportunity to rock out.

So he designed a program to spark string students' passion through the exploration of

new styles, improvisation, and connection with an audience. You'll find his bold aspirations for the future of string playing described in this issue's Teen Strings special section.

Teen string players aren't the only ones who find inspiration in a new approach. Cellist Jan Vogler and his trio, for instance, are touring the country with Bill Murray, exploring the ways in which poetry, literature, and music intersect. And violinist Caroline Goulding, when given the opportunity at Montana's Tippet Rise Art Center to curate her own program, chose weighty material in order to seek more metaphysical connections.

I hope you enjoy these and the many other stories in this issue, including a discussion of natural alternatives to traditional bow-making materials, a chat with Jordi Savall about a near-forgotten Renaissance-period composer, a few pointers on making it as a busker, and much more.

As always, let us know what you think!

—Megan Westberg, editor

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A photograph of violinist Mark Wood performing on stage with an orchestra. He is in the center, wearing a white shirt, playing a violin. The background is filled with other musicians and instruments, all bathed in a purple light. The foreground shows the silhouettes of an audience with their hands raised.

ELECTRIC

**Violinist Mark Wood
on his Electrify Your Strings
program, and how it's
shaking up string education**

By David Templeton



AVENUE

“There have been a number of turning points in the history of music, and in musical education,” says Mark Wood. “Right now, I think, the work I’ve been doing with Electrify Your Strings has put us at the center of a major turning point for both. Fifty years from now, people will be looking back, saying that this moment is when everything changed, and after that, music was never the same again.”

“I really believe that,” Wood says with a laugh, adding, “Yeah, I am that crazy.”

If Mark Wood is crazy, it’s working for him.

A prolific electric violinist, Emmy-winning composer, and an original member of the rock group the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Wood is also the founder of Wood Violins, designing and manufacturing a line of high-performance electric violins, including the Viper, now used by an array of professional violinists, especially in the rock and pop world. His most recent solo album, *Turbow*, was released in 2016.

As an educator, he’s worked for decades to save music programs in the public school system, and to encourage the investment of

time and money into building up string programs in both public and private schools. Later this year, he'll be releasing *Electrify Your Strings: The Mark Wood Improvisational Violin Method*, a curriculum for students that includes original compositions designed to push young musicians to engage more emotionally with their playing, and to learn to improvise—a crucial part of Wood's approach to teaching.

Seventeen years ago, he launched Electrify Your Strings, an educational-outreach program designed to take traditional music education and supercharge it with some fiery rock 'n' roll iconoclasm and sheer rock-star razzle-dazzle.

Heather Gonzalez, a San Antonio, Texas-based middle-school teacher and high-school director, says that she's seen exponential growth in the orchestra programs at her schools after participating in Wood's program. In her first year bringing Electrify Your Strings to her school district, the orchestra program had about 250 students from two schools. Now, the program has spread to

other districts and brought the orchestra programs' numbers to 1,200 students.

"Using the Electrify Your Strings model and event, the Rayburn middle-school program grew not only through recruitment of new students, but through a marked difference in retention," Gonzalez says, "especially with the number of middle-school students that continued with orchestra in high school."

"It's working," says Wood, who believes that the young people trained through his program are being inspired and motivated in entirely new ways. "I am witnessing a ground-surge like nothing we've seen since Woodstock and the '60s changed the way we see and play the guitar," he says. "In the '50s, the electric guitar was really just an accompaniment instrument. Once Jimi Hendrix came along, the electric guitar went from being a box with strings on it, a million-dollar industry in America, to a billion-dollar industry, and music has never been the same since. Suddenly, everybody was excited about the electric guitar. They were inspired, not by the physical instrument itself, but by the person playing it.

"I've always believed that when a master plays an instrument, *that's* what sells that instrument, *that's* what demonstrates its potential," he continues. "Fender and Gibson do not sell guitars. Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton and Carlos Santana and Dave Grohl sell guitars."

In much the same way, Wood believes it will be musicians who will "sell" the idea of playing music to new generations of young string players.

"You don't know how many times I've heard people in their 40s or 50s, who come up to me after a concert, say, 'If I'd heard someone play the violin the way you do, back when I was in fourth grade, I might still have been playing the violin in fifth grade,'" says Wood. "That's why Electrify Your Strings is a musician-driven education program, with a trained crew of 15 artist mentors who go into schools to inspire and empower kids.

"Our mentors all have teaching experience and teaching credentials, but we do not label them as teachers," he says. "We label them as artist mentors. Musicians must be the leaders of this movement."

And Wood does see it as a movement.

"We've had one Woodstock moment, 50 years ago," he says. "Well, I believe this is the Mark Woodstock. I am witnessing, with the electric violin, what I saw happen in the '60s with the electric guitar. Electrify Your Strings isn't just about teaming up with teachers in schools to save and empower the string programs in those schools. Though it is definitely doing that.

"It's mainly about introducing kids, and the public in general, to the beauty and power of a bowed string," he goes on. "With our program, people see a bowed string doing so much more than they've ever seen it do in traditional and classic music. That's when they learn that, while the traditional violin can do magnificent things, the electric violin can do anything."

If Wood's enthusiastic grandiloquence makes him sound like a cross between Professor Harold Hill and the Pied Piper—"The Pied Viper," he revises—Wood points to the last 17 years, and stack of teacher testimonials, as evidence that his enthusiasm is grounded.

"We've taken Electrify Your Strings into schools with a string program of 50 kids, and





seen it grow to 250 kids within two years,” he says. “That’s amazing! The data show that the drop-off rate from middle school to high school, for string players, is pretty severe,” he says. “Sixty to 70 percent of string players drop the instrument once they get to high school. It can’t compete with computers and sports and all the other stuff.”

And even if they do stick with it for the full four years of high school, Wood suggests, after graduation, the drop-off rates get worse.

“The truth is, it’s just very difficult for these young string players to continue interacting with the world outside of their high school string program,” Wood says. “What do you think the rate is of guitar players dropping their instrument after high school? It’s zero. If they’ve managed to stick with it all the way through junior high school and high school, then by the time they graduate, it’s their way of life.”

The reason, he says, is that for those kids, their commitment is not driven by the curriculum they’ve been studying. It’s driven by their passion for the music.

“It’s hard to put into words how my program has grown and changed [since EYS],” Gonzalez says. “Through the use of EYS, I have been able to teach my students to ‘step away’ from the music stand and to communicate with the audience. It was very daunting and uncomfortable at first, but students learned to let go and share their joy with the audience.”

The tools students acquire through the EYS program have improved a myriad of skills from technique to self-confidence, Gonzalez says. “[It] has turned them into leaders not only in the music classroom, but in all aspects of their life,” she adds. Experiencing EYS has also inspired a real hunger for orchestra and classical music among her students. “I have had so many heart-warming experiences

when taking my students to classical concerts,” she says. “They are on the edge of their seats engrossed in the music; they are in tears since they have learned to connect emotionally to music—they can’t contain their joy. I heard a student sitting behind me at a soloist concert gasping and exclaiming in excitement at many of the difficult passages. I really feel this is another layer of what they are learning using EYS and Mark Wood’s musical vision in the school orchestra setting.”

“Our program uses that obvious fact,” Wood says, “that you find a way to do whatever it is that you are most passionate about. So our program is not just about teaching notes, and charts, and technique. It’s about getting these kids passionate about playing the violin, about listening to violin music, and cheering on the other kids who are passionate about the violin.”

Though Wood’s primary genre is rock ‘n’ roll, he wants to make it clear that he listens

to classical music every day, that his brothers are all classical musicians in symphony orchestras, and that he tells his students that they should also listen and play classical music whenever they can.

"I would never say that one kind of music is better than another, but we have to be realistic," he says. "If we pigeonhole any instrument into only one style of playing it, we remove 99 percent of the kids who are interested in playing that instrument."

In the standard Electrify Your Strings experience, Wood or one of his trained mentors travels to a school, where for a period between two days and a week they work with the kids, play with the kids, and then join those kids onstage for a concert, which is almost always a benefit for that school's music program.

During the classroom portion of the program, the teacher remains a vital part of the experience. "I insist that the teacher stand right at my side," Wood says. "They're not out

of the room, or sitting in the back grading papers, or even just sitting there watching. It's important that the students witness their teacher partnering with me, so when I leave, the teacher can take what those kids have accomplished, and guide that forward."

The first question he asks is who the most important person in the room is.

"They usually don't understand right away," Wood remarks. "But then I say, 'The most important person in the room is your audience.' I get them thinking about their instrument as more than just a box with strings, and more as a way to communicate emotions."

Encouraging improvisation, Wood says, is a major way to do that, and a significant part of the Electrify Your Strings program. Improvisation is paired with the other two elements of the program—technology and American styles.

"Music is such a fire-breathing dragon for us humans, compelling us to get up every morning and meet the day," he says. "Music is an *emotional* thing. So it needs to be taught emotionally. Yes, we have to teach the nuts-and-bolts of it, the tools a musician learns and uses. But tools aren't the engine. Your passion is the engine. So you first have to fire up a passion for music, then encourage them to learn all of those tools in making their music as good as it can possibly be."

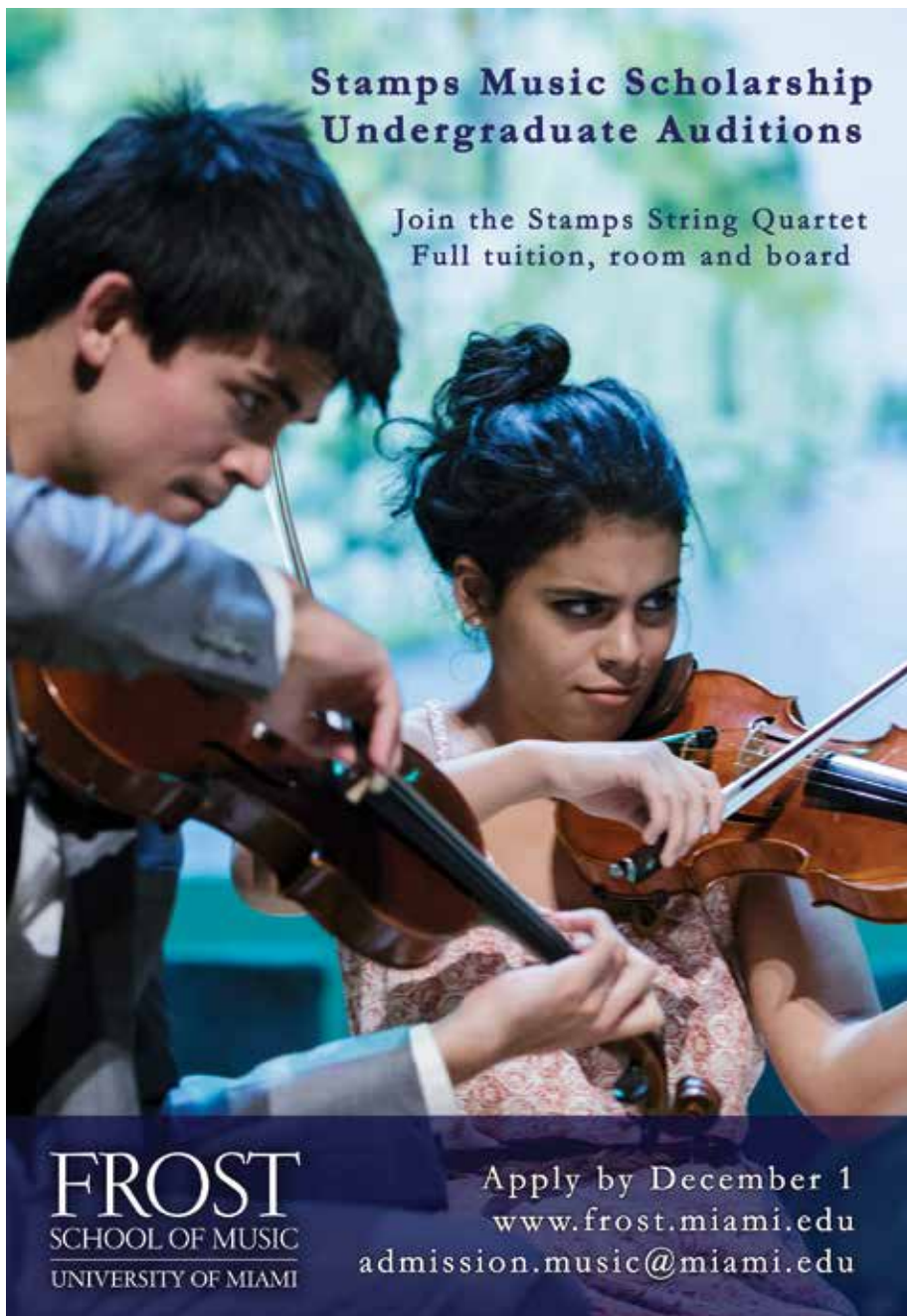
Wood points out that a lot of string programs, when schools are lucky to have them at all, operate on about \$500 a year. That's another reason why he's developed Electrify Your Strings, as a way to raise money for schools as well.

"We work with the kids, they get fired up, and we put on a show," he says. "The press and the public pay attention, because the mentors have some celebrity to them, and that gets the press excited. The show packs people in, raises money for the music program, and when it's all over, the kids and their teachers have a rekindled passion for music."

Especially string music.

"We are seeing a ripple of change that is gradually turning into a tidal wave of enthusiasm for string music, string education, string musicianship, and stringed instruments," Wood says. "I truly believe this tidal wave will change the course of human history."

"I did mention I'm crazy, right? Well, crazy changes the world. And with this program, that's exactly what we plan to do." ■



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